



# HARRY HOUDINI

## MAGICIAN OR PSYCHIC?

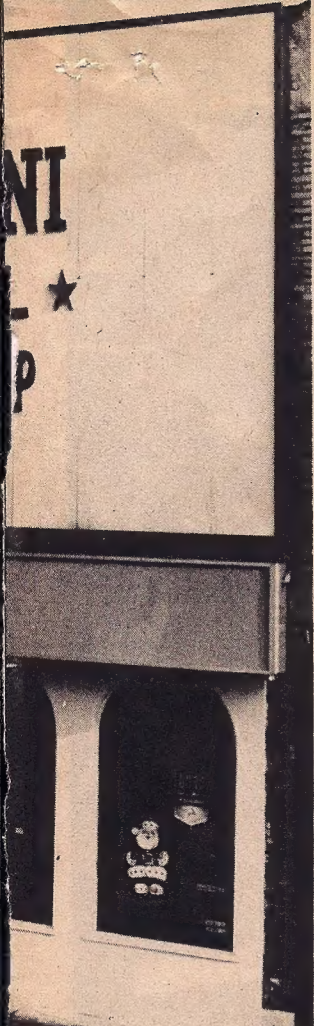
For more than half a century, Walter B. Gibson has been recognized as an outstanding authority on magic and psychic phenomena. His series of weekly articles on "Miracles — Ancient and Modern" were syndicated throughout the world, beginning in 1922, and included many methods used by bogus mediums up until that time, while in a later series, "Human Enigmas", he discussed baffling cases of mediumship that were then current.

This won the attention of Houdini and Dunninger, the leading psychic investigators of the period and both called upon Gibson to serve on special committees to examine the claims of self-styled mediums. While engaged in that work, Gibson also made the acquaintance of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the great champion of Spiritualism and Dr. Hereward Carrington, noted pioneer in the field of psychic investigation.

During 1928, Gibson worked with Howard Thurston, America's leading magician, on Thurston's life story, which appeared serially in *Colliers Magazine*.

From 1931 to 1946, Gibson wrote 283 book-length adventures of *The Shadow*, under the pen-name of Maxwell Grant. These appeared in *The Shadow Magazine* and were later adapted into a now-famous radio series. In 1948, the *American Weekly* called upon Gibson to write a historical article covering the one-hundredth anniversary of the famous "rappings" whereby the Fox Sisters ushered in the era of Modern Spiritualism. Since then, he has concentrated more and more upon occult subjects; and today, *The Complete Book of Psychic Science*, by Walter B. and Litzka R. Gibson, stands as a top-seller in the field.





Left, front of the Houdini Hall of Fame, Niagara Falls, Ontario, housing memorabilia relating to Houdini and other very prominent mystifiers of the past. Mr. Hewat Mackenzie, author, believed that Houdini could actually make his physical body disintegrate and cause it to reassemble elsewhere. To the end, Houdini maintained a firm disbelief in the realm of spiritualism, and continuously strove to expose the fraudulent mediums who deceive the public. Right, Harry Houdini in reflective mood, one of his favorite photos.



By WALTER B. GIBSON

**P**EOPLE have been asking a single question ever since Houdini's tragic death, 47 years ago: Will he return from beyond the veil? To date, the question has not been firmly answered. It is one subject that apparently can never be properly debated, for the simple reason that the opposing factions—believers and skeptics—are so far apart in their opinions that there is no middle ground. Neither will grant the other the benefit of a single argument, pro or con. So the question of Harry Houdini's return is one that must decide itself.

Even on that score the existing claims are totally at odds. Believers insist that Houdini has frequently spoken from beyond, through the agency of persons gifted with psychic powers; and some claim that he has actually materialized at seances conducted by spirit mediums. Scoffers write off all that as a cross between nonsense and fakery; perhaps both. So there the case should rest, with both sides deadlocked, except for one factor which could prove itself a real argument settler.

In Niagara Falls, Ontario, there is a remarkable museum called the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame, replete with paraphernalia and memorabilia relating to Houdini and other great mystifiers of the past. Among the exhibits is a sealed box, specially prepared

two years after Houdini's death, under the auspices of Joseph Dunninger, then Chairman of the Universal Council for Psychical Research. Designed as a test for psychic or spiritualistic powers, this box contains a pencil suspended on an elastic band. There is a blank pad below the pencil.

Anyone who professes to have spiritualistic or psychic ability is welcome to try for a \$31,000 reward by causing the pencil in the box to write a message on the pad of paper, provided the adhesive seals on the box remain unbroken until the test is completed. The \$31,000 will be paid by the Directors of the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame, who have agreed to continue the tradition established by both Houdini and Dunninger, in their efforts to learn if spiritistic manifestations could be genuinely produced.

This type of test was chosen for a definite reason. It involves what spiritualists term "direct writing" in which a spirit hand deliberately transcribes a meaningful message. This should not be confused with "automatic writing," in which a living person goes into a trance and writes messages, supposedly under the guidance of a controlling spirit. Odd messages sometimes result, but that doesn't prove that they come from the spirit world. They could more logically be from the person's own subconscious mind. The same applies to



Walter B. Gibson (left) in a corner of his extensive library on Magic and the Occult discusses psychic phenomena with Sidney H. Radner, owner of the famed "Water Torture Cell," on display in famous Houdini Magical Hall Of Fame.



This sealed box contains the pencil and pad now awaiting a spirit message, with reward of \$31,000 offered to anyone who can produce such message. All any Beyond Reality reader must do is induce some spirit to jot down a few words.



the Ouija board, which is marked with letters and figures, so that people can push a little pointer around the board and have it spell out names and numbers.

So the crucial test still hangs in the balance, in the form of pencil poised above a blank pad in a sealed box in the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame, with the directors ready to deliver \$31,000 to anyone who can induce a friendly spirit to write two little words, like "Pay me", or anything just as simple.

It is in deference to such believers that the sealed box is on display and

continually available at the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame in Niagara Falls, Ontario. In offering \$31,000 to anyone who can produce a written message inside that sealed box, the directors are not demanding the impossible. They are simply asking some gifted medium to make the spirits respond exactly as they used to do in the good old days when spirit slate writing was all the rage.

So far, no one has made a serious try for the \$31,000 offered by the museum directors, but there are ardent spiritualists who are sure that someone not only will try, but will

succeed. What is more, there are believers who are ready to name the master medium who will thereby prove that contact with the spirit world is a positive fact.

The name of that master medium is Harry Houdini, who became famous in 1900 as "The World's Greatest Magician," whose specialty was sensational "escapes."

Considering that Houdini has been dead for nearly 50 years, this may come as a surprise, but only to skeptics. Believers do not accept death as an actuality; they regard it simply as a transition from





**Houdini's original Chinese water torture cell in which the famous magician thrilled thousands with his amazing escapes.**

**Left to Right, The Amazing Randi, modern escape king, Walter B. Gibson, associate of Houdini, Mo Figuera, assistant to Randi, Sidney H. Radner, owner of the water torture cell and Henry Muller, founder of the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame.**

one plane of existence to another. So it is quite natural for a medium to function from the "other side," if he or she happened to have great psychic power while on the earthly plane. Believers feel that this is all the more likely when a spirit is "earthbound" as they term it. That accounts for apparitions, haunted houses, and poltergeists, those prankish entities that throw objects or start mysterious fires, and the like. It also accounts for Houdini.

In his early career, Houdini actually posed as a spirit medium and one of his specialties was slate writ-

ing, for it dated back to the time of Doctor Slade. But chiefly, he put on an act at halls and museums, in which he was bound with ropes, handcuffs and shackles; or placed in some object like a locked trunk, or a nailed box. Whatever the form of restraint, Houdini escaped from it, while hidden in a curtained cabinet, from which he emerged, completely free. He then let people examine the articles and wonder how he had released himself.

Such things had been done by spirit mediums, but in a different way. They let themselves be bound

and placed in a cabinet; manifestations then took place, like ringing bells, beating tamborines, throwing objects from the cabinet; and afterward, the medium would be found, as securely bound as before. This, believers said, proved that spirits were responsible. Skeptics scoffed, saying that the mediums simply slipped their bonds, did the manifestations themselves, and got back into the ropes, handcuffs, boxes, or what-have-you. Believers countered, saying that the spirits who released them, also rebound them.

The mediums ran into a lot of trouble, not only from skeptics, but the public, who branded them as fakes. So Houdini, who was very smart, cut the act at the turning point. Once out of the bonds, he came from the cabinet and took a bow, claiming credit for the whole thing. When believers insisted that spirits must have been responsible, Houdini branded spiritualism as a fake. That won him the support of the skeptics, who represented the majority, which was just what Hou-





**One of the exhibits at the Magical Hall of Fame is the antique locks from Houdini's collection. He could open them without the keys.**

dini wanted, for instead of mobbing him, they mobbed his critics.

The man who called the turn on all that was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He was an ardent believer in spiritualism, which caused skeptics to think that he could easily be duped. But he was also the creator of Sherlock Holmes, the greatest detective of all time, the master of deduction, who was famous long before Houdini and will probably be famous long after. In an article entitled, *The Riddle of Houdini*, Doyle laid on the line, in no uncertain terms:

*Who was the greatest medium-baiter of modern times? Undoubtedly Houdini. Who was the greatest physical medium of modern times? There are some who would be inclined to give the same answer.*

One man strongly inclined that

way was Hewat Mackenzie, author of a book on *Spirit Intercourse*, who had attended many spirit seances, before witnessing Houdini's escape from a giant milk can filled with water, which was placed within the usual curtained cabinet. Here is Mackenzie's description and opinion:

*A small iron tank filled with water was deposited on the stage, and in it, Houdini was placed, the water completely covering his body. Over this was placed an iron lid with three hasps and staples, and these were securely locked. The body was then completely dematerialized within the tank in one and a half minutes while the author stood immediately over it. Without disturbing any of the locks, Houdini was transferred from the tank direct to the*

*back of the stage front, dripping with water and attired in the blue jersey suit in which he entered the tank.*

While the author stood near the tank during the dematerialization process, a great loss of physical energy was felt by him, such as is usually felt by sitters in materializing seances who have a good stock of vital energy, as in such phenomena a large amount of energy is required. This startling manifestation of one of nature's profoundest miracles was probably regarded by most of the audience as a very clever trick.

In short, Mackenzie thought that Houdini could actually disintegrate his physical body and reassemble it elsewhere, thus escaping from confinement. Doyle not only went along with it; he also told about a "test" which Houdini had demonstrated for ex-president Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt on a transatlantic liner, in which Teddy folded a sheet of paper, personally placed it between two slates and put the question, "Where was I last Christmas?" When the paper was opened, it bore a map of the Andes Mountains in South America, showing the exact location. Doyle was confident that this could only have been accomplished through psychic power on Houdini's part.

Now, if Houdini could dematerialize his physical body and produce genuine spirit messages while on the earthly plane, it seems logical that he could materialize himself from the spirit plane and bring messages along. But you can't go on speculation where psychic phenomena are concerned. You need positive testimony from reliable witnesses to establish such a theory. Very well, here is one of the best; a statement from Will Goldston, who ran a magical emporium in London, England, and wrote many books on magic which included some of Houdini's secrets.

Eager to investigate psychic phenomena, and hoping to disprove such claims, Goldston went to a seance two years after Houdini's

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death. There, a spirit form developed, with its wrists clamped together as if handcuffed. According to Goldston, it spoke hoarsely, saying, "I'm Houdini. Don't you know me?" At last the strange shape pulled its wrists apart and disappeared. In Goldston's opinion, the spirit was Houdini's, but he was "lost" in his "new sphere". By way of explanation, Goldston added:

*Houdini was always a difficult man to convince, and I think it more than likely that he does not realize that he is dead; dead, I mean, in an earthly sense. He has lost his perspective and as a spiritual being can not realize his true position in regard to the friends he has left on earth. He thinks he is still one of us.*

Goldston's statement is backed by the fact that Houdini made pacts with certain persons, saying that if he should die before them, he would endeavor, as a spirit, to transmit specific code words that he left in their possession. That was totally out of character for a skeptic, for there is no other case on record where a skeptic even admitted that spirit communication could be a remote possibility. The answer, therefore is: Houdini, in even intimating that he might come through, marked himself as a believer. That deduction, as Sherlock Holmes would have said, "is elementary, my dear Watson."

At about the same time when Will Goldston, in London, was watching Houdini's manacled materialization go through its grotesque gyrations, a sophisticated spiritist in New York, named Arthur Ford, was accomplishing a more intellectual achievement. Through a controlling spirit whom he called "Fletcher," Ford, a man with a ministerial background, brought through the "code words" that Houdini had left with his wife Bessie. That created a furor that has persisted ever since. Bessie Houdini first admitted, then disclaimed, the coded proof that would have clinched things one way or the other. Ford, alternately hailed as a hero

and accused of fraud, faded politely from the picture for the next 40 years.

But all during those 40-odd years, other mediums continued to receive Houdini messages. None were "evidential" in any sense of the term. There was a report that Houdini's ghost had been glimpsed in his old brownstone home in New York City, so occasionally, mediums were invited to hold their seances there, in the hope that they might more readily attract the famed mystifier's wraith, but to no avail. At the most recent session, held on Hallowe'en in 1971, the 45th anniversary of Houdini's death, a trance medium brought through a spirit she claimed was Houdini's, but his tone, the expressions that he used, were totally out of character, as persons who had known Houdini could testify. When asked questions that Houdini easily could have answered, the "spirit" said that it was being "educated to higher things" on its new ethereal plane and had "forgotten" all the trivial happenings of its earthly existence. Needless to say, the medium didn't qualify for the \$31,000 reward; not even the \$1,000 part.

In striking contrast, for many years following Houdini's death, his widow, Bessie, and Houdini's closest friends met annually on Hallowe'en, hoping to invoke his ghost in a more realistic way. They sat around a table adorned with some of his favorite gadgets, such as handcuffs and padlocks, that he alone could open through some secret method. Among these were hair-trigger devices, which the slightest psychic impulse could have sprung; yet results were nil. At one of these seances, held in a Greenwich Village apartment, in 1948, believers and skeptics teamed with impartial investigators in an all-out effort to bring Houdini through; and the same procedure was followed in 1966, before a theater audience in Pittsburgh, but with no success.

Skeptics claim that this proves that Houdini's knowledge of secret gimmicks died with him. Believers

still swing to Doyle's theory that Houdini used no gimmicks; that his only secret was his psychic power which is indestructible and should eventually manifest itself. Curiously, those widely divergent opinions have found a common meeting point, at the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame, in Niagara Falls, Ontario. There, only a year ago, a new exhibit was installed; namely, Houdini's famous Chinese Water Torture Cell. This consists of a glassfronted tank filled with water, in which Houdini was suspended, head downward, with his ankles clamped in a padlocked cover, in full view of an entire theater audience. At every performance, the device was inspected by a committee from the audience. Yet he escaped from the Water Torture Cell thousands of times, always to arrive, dripping wet, before an astounded audience.

When Houdini died, he willed his entire show to his brother, Hardeen, who sold many of the devices to Sidney Radner, of Holyoke, Massachusetts, among them the original Water Torture Cell. It is that unique apparatus, which is now on display at the Houdini Museum. No longer are committees restricted to a brief inspection of this remarkable contrivance. They can examine it indefinitely. The directors of the museum will even arrange weekly rates at local motels if they want to prolong their stay. But they aren't offering a reward to anybody who solves its secret, because they know that nobody can, or will—except Houdini. He alone holds the answer.

Will he ever reveal it? If he does, his answer will come from the spirit world, so it might as well be manifested in the form of direct writing, inside that sealed box which is also reposing in the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame. Perhaps, some day, a passing tourist, with the gift of psychic powers, will stop in front of the \$31,000 exhibit and announce that Houdini's greatest secret has been solved; and when the box is opened, the answer will be found upon the pad beneath the poised pencil. □